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ABSTRACT

The role of personal narrative in multicultural education is examined. First, the relationship between student voice, storytelling, and the transmission of culture is discussed in the context of recent literature on those topics. The concept of voice describes the process of expressing oneself meaningfully through utterances and actions according to rules of social discourse. It is argued that the individual develops an individual and cultural voice through narration and dialogue, his/her own and/or others'. However, narrative is seen as rarely being given that positive a role in the classroom. Narrative is often treated as a lower form of discourse, and students are pushed to leave it behind as they progress through school. Expository or essayist writing is emphasized. As a result, cultural forms of narrative that are not essayist are de-emphasized. Teacher perceptions of the non-conforming discourse of some students may affect the students' access to literacy-related events, depending on the degree to which teacher and child share discourse conventions and strategies. It is proposed that teachers be taught the politics of discourse and learn listening skills that convey to students the message that while the cultural stories they have to tell are different, none is inferior. (MSE)

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Story, voice, and culture: The politics of narrative in multicultural education

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This paper explores the role of personal narrative in an education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist. I begin by discussing the relationship between student voice, storytelling, and the transmission of culture. Next, I examine studies that look at the way students' narratives are currently received in the classroom, exploring the implications of their reception in terms of the politics of culture in the classroom and beyond. Finally, I imagine a possible world, exploring the potential of multicultural education to nurture students' voices and the potential of students' stories to transform society.

> As chroniclers of our own stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been....These stories, these myriad voices, then serve to instruct and transform society (Cooper, 1991:111).

What is the place of personal narrative in an education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist? Can stories really help to transform society? Much has been written recently about the potential of storytelling as a way for students to develop their voices, locate themselves in their cultures, critique the current social order, and, informed by a sense of connectedness to others, responsibly imagine *possible worlds* (Noddings, 1984; Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Bruner, 1986; Lee, 1991). Before we can evaluate the power of stories in multicultural classrooms, however, we need to understand their role in the discourse politics that shape power relations within the classroom and within society. In this paper, I will begin by discussing the relationship between student voice, storytelling, and the transmission of culture. Next, I will examine studies that look at the way students' narratives are currently received in the classroom,

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exploring the implications of their reception in terms of the politics of culture in the classroom and beyond. Finally, I will imagine a possible world, exploring the potential of multicultural education to nurture students' voices and the potential of students' stories to transform society.

Voice and the Cultural Politics of Discourse

The notion of student "voice" has been criticized by Ellsworth (1992) because it does not necessarily question the power relations between teachers and students or encourage students to explore their own contradictory subjectivities. O'Connor, on the other hand, argues that the concept of voice is necessarily political, and he uses it to describe how individuals orient themselves within the cultural politics of educational discourse. O'Connor suggests that it is within classroom discourse that the power relations between students and teachers are realized; thus, he argues that voice is "the basic unit of a politics of discourse" (1989:58). Conceiving of the classroom as a "battleground" where meanings are continuously negotiated between and among students and teacher, O'Connor explains that an individual's voice is necessarily socially-oriented: "The concept of voice describes the process of expressing oneself in a meaningful way through orienting utterances and actions according to the rules of the social discourse" (59-60). O'Connor argues that multicultural educators need to examine how individual students' voices develop (or do not) as part of an interrogation of the dynamics of educational discourse.

As has been well documented (Michaels, 1981; Heath, 1983; Bennett, 1983), mismatches often occur between the voices that students develop through interaction with their home cultures and the voices that are allowed full participation in school language. O'Connor uses the concept of "cultural voice" to explain the particularly painful dynamics of such clashes:

> [W]hile difficult choices are created by the politics of any utterance, the most powerful politics exist in cultural discourses—where appropriate representations are reinforced by bonds of solidarity. Adopting a cultural voice involves assuming a dialogic orientation that is emotionally bound to the ideological principles and values of the cultural horizon (1989:63).

In other words, choosing (or feeling forced) to speak in a voice other than that which they have developed within their families and communities may feel to students like turning away from themselves and what they care about. In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez poignantly expresses this feeling when he writes about how he felt learning English—the school language—when his family spoke Spanish: "I felt that I had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close" (1982:3).

For multicultural educators, the connection that O'Connor makes between cultural voices and what he calls "cultural reconstruction" (1989:64) is another convincing argument for paying close attention to both nurturing student voices *and* questioning the politics of educational discourse. Referring to folklorist Glassie's definition of cultural reconstruction as the way that "cultural principles and values are reconstructed each time an individual expresses them" (64), O'Connor suggests that both cultures and individuals may lose the "capacity to evolve" when cultural voices are silenced (64). Recent studies (e.g., Fine, 1989) that have looked at "official school discourse," examining what gets said and what does not, support O'Connor's concern, pointing to silencing and alienation as the results of privileging the dominant discourse and devaluing other cultural voices. While taking into account Ellsworth's caution that any individual student's voice "is a 'teeth-gritting' and often contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ideology," (1992:103) we also need to take seriously O'Connor's vision of cultural genocide as the consequence of not heeding the development of our students' individual and cultural voices.

Narration and the Development of Individual and Cultural Voices

Gee writes that "[o]ne of the primary ways—probably *the* primary way—human beings make sense of their experience is by casting it in narrative form" (1985:11). Thus, we tell stories about our lives in order to understand ourselves, and these stories, in turn, affect who we are and who we become. As Grumet suggests, "[w]e are, at least partially, constituted by the stories we tell to others and to ourselves about experience" (1991:69). This conception of the self as formed through discourse—through narration and dialogue—is similar to O'Connor's notion of voice as a socially-oriented construction. Bruner posits a

connection between individual and cultural autobiographies analogous to O'Connor's relation of individual and cultural voices:

> Given their constructed nature and their dependence upon the cultural conventions and language usage, life narratives obviously reflect the prevailing theories about "possible lives" that are part of one's culture...eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very "events" of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. And given the cultural shaping to which I referred, we also become variants of the culture's canonical forms (1987:15).

Both O'Connor and Bruner suggest that individuals and their cultures shape and are shaped by each other: individual selves are formed within the limitations of culturally possible narratives, and cultures depend on individuals adopting and expressing cultural voices for their reconstruction. These dialectical relationships—between story and self, voice and culture—suggest that narrative can play a powerfully positive role in a multicultural classroom. According to Witherell, "the teller or receiver of stories can discover connections between self and other, penetrate barriers to understanding, and come to know more deeply the meanings of his or her own historical and cultural narrative" (1991:94). Looking closely at how narrative is currently used in our schools, however, reveals that narrative rarely plays that positive role. Perhaps because of their very power to support cultural pluralism and challenge the dominant discourse, students' stories are not being heard.

Narrative and "Essayist Literacy": Stories as Subjugated Knowledge

> The link between formal written discourse and formal knowledge has served, since the Greeks, to exclude whole classes of knowledge and to keep them embedded and preserved in oral tradition....French scholar Michel Foucault (1977) refers to such excluded knowledges as "subjugated knowledges" (Florio-Ruane, 1991:251).

Currently, narrative represents a subjugated form of knowledge-making in our schools and our society. While many college composition teachers, for instance, begin their courses with an assignment asking students to write a

personal narrative, they usually feel pressure to "move them on" quickly to less personal and more formal exposition. Narrative is seen as "easy" and as "a cognitive prison that denies students the opportunity to move beyond their own limited world views" (DiPardo, 1990b:61-62). This perception of narrative is a culturally specific one, however. In reality, many cultures use narrative as a sophisticated communicative strategy and mode of knowledge creation. Gee posits the existence of a continuum of communicative strategies, with orally based strategies at one end, and literate-based strategies at the other. He suggests that narrative traditions belong at the oral end of the continuum, while the literate-based strategies reach "their purest form in the essay and in speech that is influenced by so-called 'essayist literacy'" (1985:10). Arguing that our society is biased towards the literate end of the continuum, Gee argues against the application of a deficit model to what are simply differences: "the oral style is often characterized negatively in terms of what it lacks that the literate style has....This only reflects, at the academic level, the literate bias of our culture and the negative attitude at the school level that translates into outright prejudice" (11).

There is no question that, in many teachers' minds, narration occupies the bottom of a hierarchy of discourse forms. As DiPardo relates, schools push students to leave stories behind as they progress through school:

> A discourse closely associated with the oral tradition of one's home and community, personal storytelling is de-emphasized as students approach high school. Students are urged to "outgrow" their early reliance on storytelling and move into the presumably more sophisticated world of abstracted, essayist prose (1990a:47).

What do our students lose when they are urged to outgrow stories? As individuals, they may lose the opportunity to develop their voices in relation to others. In words reminiscent of O'Connor's conception of voice, DiPardo writes about Basic Writing students: "When we push exposition at the expense of personal meaning, we are forgetting foundations: students need a way to belong that is more than a blending in–a way, that is, of becoming a contributing part of this social dynamism, this commonwealth of learners" (1990a:45). Rosen, focusing again on the politics of classroom discourse, suggests that we already know what results when students' stories are devalued: "If we subtract storytelling rights from students in classrooms, then what have they left to say in that rule-

governed setting? We know the answer. We have heard the constrained exchanges and have seen the written evidence" (cited in DiPardo, 1990a:46). Thus, one effect of the devaluation of narrative in our classrooms may be the silencing of individual voices.

Why is narration considered less than exposition? Perhaps the reasons are more political than pedagogical or epistemological. Rosen suggests that the devaluation of narrative is an issue of power—that stories are denigrated simply because everyone has one: "You will not need reminding that in our society common property is suspect. What everyone possesses is scarcely worth possessing" (cited in Dixon, 1989:12). If we consider narrative, as does Gee, to be situated at one end of a continuum of equally valuable communicative strategies, rather than at the bottom of a hierarchy of discourse forms (1985:11), it becomes easier to see that "socialization to the patterns of essayist literacy is not a hallmark of maturation, but, rather, inculcation of a particular set of cultural values" (DiPardo, 1990a:50).

It is important to understand that both narrative and what Bruner (1986) calls "paradigmatic" modes of thinking are found in all cultures (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991:46). However, in many cultures *narrative* modes are the more highly-valued way of making meaning. Labov and Waletzky, for example, found that young people and adults in South Central Harlem used complex narratives to reorganize experience and "to carry out the functions that are important in their system of values" (cited in DiPardo, 1990a:48). Cultures which value relationships consider listening to and telling stories to be an especially powerful way of learning. In Scott Momaday's novel *The House Made of Dawn*, a Native American preacher talks about how he learned from his grandmother's stories: "When she told me those old stories something strange and good and powerful was going on. I was a child and the old woman was asking me to come directly into the presence of her mind and spirit" (1968:88). Clearly, the mode of discourse that a culture uses to create knowledge is directly related to the values of that culture. Therefore, the devaluation of narration in our schools and society, in and of itself, invites some cultural voices and silences others.

By comparing the nature of essayist literacy—the preferred discourse mode of the dominant culture in America—to the nature of narrative, we can better understand both the values of the dominant culture and the educational discourse politics that function to maintain current power relations. Bruner makes a distinction between two modes of thought that parallel these forms of literacy:

he calls them the narrative mode and the "paradigmatic" or "logico-scientific" mode. Bruner argues that each mode provides "distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality" (1986:11). He characterizes the paradigmatic mode as attempting "to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation....It deals in general causes, and in their establishment, and makes uses of procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth" (12-13). In contrast, the narrative mode "deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. It strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place" (13). While narratives focus on particular contexts, paradigmatic thought strives toward abstractions. Perhaps the value the dominant culture in our society places on the latter mode has to do with the ability of abstractions to smooth over individual differences with generalities. If we speak in abstract terms, we are less likely to encounter the realities of the other's situation; therefore, we may be able to avoid negotiating meanings or struggling over what is true.

Bennett discusses how paradigmatic thought assumes that truth is in the text and suggests that this assumption of neutrality contributes to the maintenance of the societal status quo:

> An important characteristic of the essayist model of discourse is that the discovery of truth is placed in an essentially non-negotiable context. Text rules (e.g., the canons of formal logic and general principles of "empirical" validation) provide the basis for choosing what is to be accepted, believed and understood as true, rather than situated negotiations of intent and understanding by means of which participants jointly tie particular truths to particular contexts... (1983:56-57).

According to Bennett, the danger in this form of discourse rests in the "removal of truth from the personalized subject" (57). He cites Foucault, who relates truth to power:

> Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power....Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...(cited in Bennett, 1983:59).

Bennett's argument, which he illustrates with the narrative of Carlos, an eleven-year-old Mexican American boy, is that by privileging "the ideal texts of essayist forms of literacy," we are separating "knower from known" and limiting the development of forms of dialectical understanding which might lead to change (73). Bennett supports Dixon's claim that "abstractions mean nothing when divorced from experience, though it is true enough that abstractions divorced from experience can be used as dehumanizing tools" (1989:13). Of his informant's story, Bennett says: "I think Carlos' narrative invites such [dialectical] understanding, and in this sense it is again 'on the border': it brings us into contact with a new world, changing our old one, thereby changing us—*if* we engage in an act of appropriation" (72). Bennett's final point is an important one—the power of narrative is not just to change the teller but to affect the listener as well. At issue, however, is the question of how well we can hear the stories that depart from the ideal texts of our particular cultures.

The Consequences of Cultural Differences in Narrative Styles

While we can place narrative at the other end of a continuum from essayist literacy, we need to remember that narratives are not all the same. Collins points out that "telling stories, representing experience in narrative form, is a panhuman capability" (1985:59). However, he qualifies this statement by asserting that "this shared human capacity to render experience meaningful in narrative takes different forms in different cultures" (59). Oral narratives may differ in linguistic structures (e.g., use of temporal or logical linkages), intonation, topic-centeredness and expectations about audience participation (Labov, 1972; Collins, 1985; Gee, 1989). Within the narrative end of the oral to literate strategies continuum, then, there are cultural forms of narrative that are closer to and farther from exposition, the discourse of power. Studies analyzing the narratives of children from different cultures and investigating how they are dealt with in the classroom reinforce O'Connor's suggestion that the classroom is a battlefield in which students and teachers struggle for meaning. Unfortunately, the results of such studies also indicate that, even in classrooms where well-meaning teachers are trying to help their students gain access to mainstream literacy, the students whose cultural stories are most removed from essayist literacy are losing the battle.

Michaels (1981) studied sharing time in an ethnically-mixed first grade classroom. During sharing time, students are called upon to share a story about a past experience with the class. The teacher uses questions and comments to try to help the students structure their stories. The goal of this intervention, according to Michaels, is to "bridge the gap between the child's home-based oral discourse competence and the acquisition of literate discourse features required in written communication" (423). Comparing the narratives of a White, middle-class child and a working class African American child, Michaels writes:

> These two examples are representative of stable patterns of differential treatment, characteristic of sharing time interaction over the entire school year. In one case, the shared sense of topic, and a synchronization of questions and responses enabled teacher and child collectively to create an account that was lexically and grammatically more elaborate than what the child would be likely to create on his or her own. In the other case, lack of a sense of topic, differing narrative schemata, and apparent misreading of prosodic cues resulted in asynchronous pacing of teacher/child exchanges, fragmentation of the topic, and misevaluation of intent on the part of both teacher and child (440).

According to Michaels, being misevaluated is not the only result of sharing a narrative that does not match the (White middle-class) teacher's "ideal text"; an additional consequence is that the teacher's perception of the student's literacy affects the student's access to other classroom literacy events. "Sharing time, then can either provide or deny access to key literacy-related events, depending, ironically, on the degree to which teacher and child start out 'sharing' a set of discourse conventions and strategies" (423).

Gee (1989) describes a similar "losing battle" in his analysis of two narratives from eleven year-old girls: one from "Leona," an African American girl, and a second from "Sandy," a Caucasian girl. Gee concludes, like Michaels, that some stories are considered better than others in our schools: "Sandy's style bears the hallmarks of school-based essay-text literacy; unfortunately, children like Leona are often judged as if they were aiming for this style and missing it rather than doing something quite different and doing it well" (108). Gee also points out that, even if she were being given opportunities to learn to switch to a narrative style more consistent with the dominant discourse, Leona would still be "losing":

> Narrative style is associated with one's cultural identity and presentation of self. Therefore, a change in style can amount to a change in social identity. We know from Leona's history in school that the school has not given Leona full access to the uses of language and literacy that would enable her to switch to Sandy's style. But the matter is deeper, too: such a style is connected with another culture's mode of expression, presentation of self, and way of making sense, encapsulating values that may at points conflict with Leona's cultural values. The school does not understand or value Leona's mode of expression, doesn't see its connection to a culture and sense of self, and doesn't understand the full implications of asking Leona to switch that style (109).

The implications to which Gee points are personal, cultural, and societal. Asking Leona to learn a new way to tell stories may silence her voice or alienate her from school literacy. On the other hand, if she does successfully switch, she may, like Richard Rodriguez, lose her connection with her culture–her cultural voice. As O'Connor tells us, this could have implications for that culture; without individuals to express and thus reconstruct their value systems and principles, cultures may also be silenced. Finally, on a societal level, the consequences of not hearing certain kinds of stories may include the suppression of individual and cultural diversity and, ultimately, the continuation of existing inequities.

Leona's is a sad story, and we are left with a dilemma. As Delpit (1988) has argued, all students have the right to know that there is a language of power and to know the codes that give them access to this discourse. On the other hand, teachers' responses to students' stories seem to indicate that speaking in a non-mainstream cultural voice may limit, a priori, students' opportunities to practice the voice of the dominant culture. Can students develop and maintain their cultural voices and also learn the codes of power? Can teachers learn to hear and value stories different from their own? Can multicultural education integrate students' stories, interrupting the dynamics of cultural politics in classrooms, and transforming the staus quo? What will it take to tell a new story?

Learning to Listen: Imagining a Different Story

The purpose of looking closely at the current role of narrative in multicultural education is not just to illuminate disturbing realities. More importantly, the reason for understanding "the ways things are" is to understand how to change them. A key to this process is the constructed nature of our

society: "Social realities are not bricks that we trip over or bruise ourselves on when we kick at them, but the meanings that we achieve by the sharing of human cognition" (Bruner, 1986:122). Thus, as Bruner puts it, "the object of understanding human events is to sense the alternativeness of human possibility" (53). Stories are one way for us to imagine possible worlds; they allow us to see alternative paths and new ways of thinking. In order to understand the potential of stories in multicultural education, we need to tell ourselves a new story, one that reflects an understanding of current discourse politics but that also looks beyond them.

The first step in moving beyond the dilemma involves learning to listen. Informed by an awareness of the politics of discourse, we (teachers in multicultural classrooms) need to teach ourselves about varieties of human expression, remind ourselves that other forms are as valuable as our own, and learn to monitor our culturally specific reactions to others' stories. As DiPardo writes:

> If stories are to be shared productively in culturally pluralistic classrooms, a different way of looking is needed–a way characterized by a careful attention to differences, respect for linguistic diversity, and cautious awareness of the possibility of miscommunication (1990a:49).

The first result of such a shift might be a growing sensitivity on our part to our students' cultures. In our imaginary multicultural classroom, students of different ethnicities, classes, and genders will feel comfortable sharing their stories because the teacher will strive to encounter students "on their own terms," thus demonstrating that she values their individual and cultural voices. Because their stories are being heard, students will have the chance to strengthen these voices, exploring themselves and their cultural narratives. According to Cooper, in their 1986 study of women's ways of knowing, Belenky et al. found that "the development of voice was particularly important in the establishment of epistemological perspectives that locate one's self within the context of one's culture" (1991:97). It is through this kind of "location" that students can gain a position from which to critique the dominant discourse. As Lee points out, "[s]tudents from poor communities, from ethnically diverse communities, need desperately to assume a voice" (1991:7) in order to become the critical readers that a democracy demands. As different cultural stories are shared, students in

our multicultural classroom will learn that different does not mean lesser. At the same time, though, they will talk about these differences and, with their teacher's help, learn to question the politics of discourse and its real life implications for their stories and for their cultures.

While the latter part of this process sounds similar to what has been called critical pedagogy, there are two important reasons for telling stories rather than critiquing the hegemony using *only* essayist prose, the language of logic and rationality. The first is that, as Lorde, puts it, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1979:112); the language of abstractions is currently the language of power, and, as Bennett explains, partly responsible for the domination and dehumanization of non-mainstream cultures (1983:57,73). The fact that narrative is a subjugated form of knowledge implies that simply by re-valuing stories we can begin to change current power relations. Secondly, the values which underlie narrative modes of discourse can be seen as inherently more transformative than those which inform essayist literacy. For example, Bruner writes that, while "there is a heartlessness" to the logic that proceeds from paradigmatic thought, "narrative is built upon concern for the human condition" (1986:13-14). And, as Noddings points out, simply knowing about suffering and oppression is not enough: "So far as can be judged from available evidence, people quite capable of intellectual concentration are neither more or less likely to attend compassionately to the afflictions of others" (1991:161). What is especially powerful and transformative about stories is that they hold cognition and emotion together; they provide a way of thinking that is not divorced from our feelings. Tappan and Brown discuss narration and reflection, arguing that stories help us become moral authorities in our own lives:

> We suggest that authorship not only expresses itself through narrative, it develops through narrative. This is because when an individual tells a moral story about an experience in his life, he must necessarily reflect on that experience....Consequently, such narration also entails learning from the event narrated, in the sense that the individual has the opportunity to consider what happened, what he thought, felt and did, and how things turned out (1991:182).

This relationship, then, between narration, reflection and a sense of moral responsibility argues that storytelling might be seen as a way to deepen our

relations with ourselves and with others, providing us with a "springboard to ethical action" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991:8).

Given this potential, can stories transform society? A close look at the cultural politics of discourse in our schools suggests that they might, but only if the stories we tell *about* the classroom change. As Pagano argues, theorists and researchers also tell stories:

> Educational theories are stories about how teaching and learning work, about who does what to whom and for what purposes; and, most particularly, educational theories are *stories about the kind of world we want to live in and about what we should do to make that world* (1991:197; emphasis added).

The challenge, then, for multicultural educators, is to understand the politics of narrative in the classroom and at the same time, to strive to tell a better story.

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